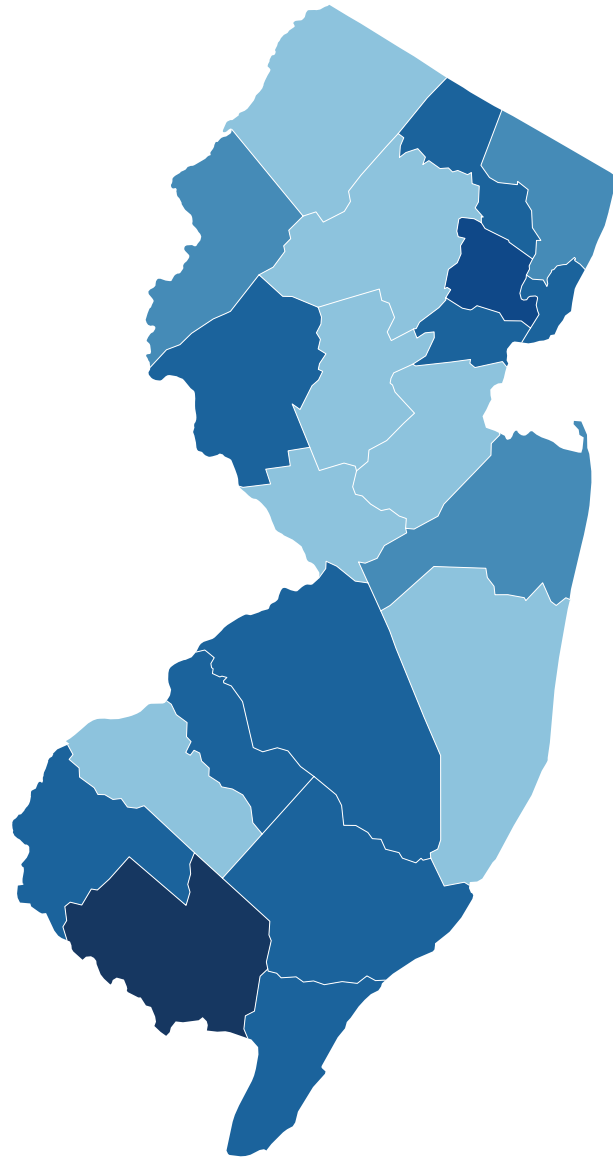


TOWARD A THRIVING FUTURE:

NEW JERSEY DASHBOARD EXPLAINER



Introduction

In New Jersey, one in every ten young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in school and not working. These teenagers and young adults—a group known as disconnected, or opportunity, youth—deserve society’s support and investment, and a growing body of research shows what works best to help them restart their educations or gain a foothold in the labor force. Successful reconnection programs address not just practical matters like having appropriate work clothes and an up-to-date resume but also the wide range of more serious barriers that opportunity youth disproportionately face, such as limited literacy or numeracy skills, mental health challenges, a history of contact with the justice system, caretaking responsibilities, and the instability and social isolation that deep poverty creates.

Addressing hurdles like these in the here-and-now lives of New Jersey’s disconnected young adults is vital, but it is not enough. We also need to pay far more attention to clearing obstacles along the path to adulthood as they appear for today’s toddlers, preschoolers, and K-12 students. Prevention—taking prompt action to keep predictable problems from developing in the first place—saves money and, most importantly, averts suffering. It is both kinder and more pragmatic to keep bad things from happening through timely interventions than to watch as known risks take root and wait to act until a young adult is already in crisis.

Youth disconnection doesn’t suddenly appear out of nowhere; it is years in the making. There are exceptions, of course; a shock like the death of a family member, a catastrophic injury, or the onset of persistent and severe mental illness can upend a young person’s life without warning. But struggles in the transition to adulthood typically have their roots in a young person’s early experiences at home, in their neighborhood, and in school. When initial developmental or scholastic challenges go unaddressed, they tend to compound. For instance, a boy who hasn’t mastered reading by the third grade, when the instructional focus shifts from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” may struggle across subjects in subsequent years. These difficulties may limit his choice of middle school programs, shutting him out of high school classes required for college and leading to feelings of frustration, alienation, and shame. Imagine instead this third-grader receiving regular tutoring during the school day with a warm and encouraging reading specialist, and, as a result, entering fourth grade on par with his classmates, feeling good about himself and supported by his teachers, and with the whole range of academic options open to him. A child’s development has many such inflection points—forks in the road where appropriate, well-timed interventions can place or keep a child on the path to a flourishing adulthood, but failure to act can leave them vulnerable to falling further and further behind.

This dashboard is a collection of indicators centered around such inflection points, starting with the earliest days of childhood, when the well-being of moms and their babies sets the stage for healthy development, through to the period of emerging adulthood, when strong connections to school and the workforce lay the foundation for thriving lives. In selecting indicators, we chose those that research shows are associated with the likelihood of on-time high school graduation, college attendance, youth disconnection, or contact with the justice system, all important markers (positive and negative) of the transition to adulthood. We were limited to those indicators that are already being collected by official sources and on a regular basis in a way that allows for comparison across places

and over time. Other criteria included that the data be statistically reliable; for instance, data on infant mortality is not available for all counties. Some relevant indicators, such as the share of students held back a grade, could not be included because the data was too old or not collected on a regular basis.

In the first quarter of 2027, Measure of America will hold a series of community conversations as well as meetings with the advisory committee guiding this work with a view toward developing a set of concrete recommendations to improve outcomes in these and other areas critical to the well-being of children, young people, and their families. We will incorporate these recommendations into this paper once the consultation process concludes.

Moms & Babies

Women's well-being during and in the months after pregnancy are closely linked to their long-term health and survival and to their children's short- and long-term outcomes.¹ More than half of maternal deaths are preventable.² Prenatal care—medical treatment and monitoring during pregnancy—is critical to identifying and addressing preventable causes of maternal morbidity and mortality, such as gestational diabetes, hypertension, infections, and anemia.³ It also enables medical professionals to discover and treat causes of adverse outcomes for newborns, such as preterm birth and low birth weight.⁴ Similarly, birth defects, which account for approximately 20 percent of infant deaths, can be more efficiently identified through prenatal testing and newborn screening. Identifying these issues early can sometimes prevent disability or death in early life.⁵ Low birth weight can impact children's health and cognitive development and is associated with a lower rate of on-time high school graduation.⁶

Pregnancy and motherhood pose extra risks to teenagers and their babies compared to those faced by mothers in their twenties and thirties, negatively affecting their educational opportunities, financial security, and health.⁷ Early motherhood itself can indicate that a teenaged girl has a limited range of educational and employment opportunities or poor access to health care; and children born to teenaged mothers are more likely than children born to older mothers to have chronic medical conditions, do less well in school, give birth in their teenage years themselves (for women), and have contact with the justice system (for men).⁸

MOMS & BABIES		
Indicator	Definition	Source
Prenatal care	Number of live births to pregnant women who received prenatal care in the first trimester as a percentage of the total number of live births.	New Jersey Department of Health, New Jersey State Health Assessment Data (NJSHAD), indicator PNC1 (county), 2022–2024.
Maternal mortality	Maternal mortality ratio: Deaths of women ages 15–44 that occurred while pregnant or within 42 days of the end of pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management (excluding accidental or incidental causes), per 100,000 live births to mothers ages 15–44, 2018–2024 pooled. Deaths are identified from death certificates by underlying cause of death (ICD-10 A34, 000–095, 098–099). Counties with suppressed counts are grouped with neighboring counties; zero-death counties are not reported.	CDC WONDER, Underlying Cause of Death database (2018–2024, 7-year rollup).
Teen births	The number of live births to females 15–17 years per 1,000 females in this age group.	New Jersey Department of Health, New Jersey State Health Assessment Data (NJSHAD), indicator TeenBirths (county), 2020–2024.
Infant mortality	Infant mortality is the death of an infant before his or her first birthday. The infant mortality rate is the number of infant deaths for every 1,000 live births.	New Jersey Department of Health, New Jersey State Health Assessment Data (NJSHAD), indicator EPHTInfMort (county), 2019–2023.
Low birth weight	Percentage of live births with a birth weight of less than 2,500 grams (approximately 5 lbs, 8 oz).	New Jersey Department of Health, New Jersey State Health Assessment Data (NJSHAD), indicator LBW (county), 2024.

Early Childhood

Children are most likely to thrive when physical and developmental delays and disabilities are identified and addressed as soon as possible and when they have the chance before kindergarten starts to develop the social and emotional skills that even the earliest grades require. Babies and toddlers with developmental delays who receive early-intervention services have greater academic success and better social and cognitive skills than similarly delayed children who do not receive such services.⁹ The opportunity to attend preschool programs as 3- and 4-year-olds allows children

to develop critical social, emotional, and cognitive skills, such as tolerating frustration, asking adults for help, cooperating with others, and communicating effectively. The quality of these early childhood experiences and environments can shape early brain development, school readiness, long-term educational success, and the ability to develop healthy relationships later in life.¹⁰

EARLY CHILDHOOD		
Indicator	Definition	Source
Early intervention	The share of 0–3 year olds with Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) enrolled in the New Jersey Early Intervention System (NJEIS).	New Jersey Early Intervention System County Performance Report, 2024–2025.
Pre-K enrollment	The share of 3–4 year olds that are enrolled in public or private school.	US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B14003, 2020–2024.

Home Environment

A lack of material resources, family instability, the presence of stress in the household, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as neglect, exposure to violence, or the death of a parent, all influence the well-being of children, both as they are growing up and into adulthood. For instance, ACEs are associated not just with a reduced likelihood of high school graduation and higher rates of unemployment, but also higher rates of anxiety and depression in childhood and a heightened risk of chronic disease in adulthood.¹¹

Children can and do thrive in family types of all sorts—single-parent families, two-parent families, and families headed by grandparents or other relatives. They can flourish in families where money is tight as well as in families awash with resources. With rare exceptions, parents want to give their children the best possible start in life. Families vary, however, in the resources they are able to bring to bear on this important task, affecting the life chances of the children in their care.¹²

Research shows that single-parent households and households where parents have less than a high school diploma tend to have fewer resources than families with two adults and families where parents have more education.¹³ Highly educated parents often have higher incomes, greater academic skills and abilities, and more free time to dedicate to supporting their children’s education.¹⁴ In comparison, parents with less education and fewer resources may have more difficulties paying for housing in a neighborhood with good schools, accessing computers and the internet, or affording supplemental activities like tutoring or camp, all of which can affect children’s educational outcomes. Students whose mothers have less than a high school diploma are also more likely to repeat a grade or to not graduate from high school than students whose parents have college degrees.¹⁵

A lack of resources can also expose parents and their children to chronic, toxic stress. Research shows that when families face extreme and sustained economic hardship, stemming from factors like unemployment, inadequate wages, and housing or food insecurity, parents are more likely to experience emotional distress, which can contribute to couple conflict and harsher parenting.¹⁶ Housing instability and frequent family relocation can similarly harm children’s development, resulting in higher rates of behavioral problems in early childhood and greater likelihood of repeating or failing a grade in school.¹⁷

HOME ENVIRONMENT		
Indicator	Definition	Source
Child poverty	Share of individuals under the age of 18 living in families whose total pre-tax money income falls below a designated poverty threshold.	US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B17001, 2020–2024.
Computer access at home	Percentage of households with a computer (desktop/laptop) or tablet.	US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B28001, 2020–2024.
Internet access at home	Percentage of households with a broadband internet subscription of any type (cable/fiber/DSL, cellular data plan, or satellite)—excludes dial-up-only and no-subscription households.	US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B28002, 2020–2024.
Family structure	Share of individuals under age 18 living with (1) a single mother or father; (2) two parents (either married or unmarried); or (3) grandparents, other relatives, or foster parents.	IPUMS USA, American Community Survey 5-year sample, 2020–2024.
Parents with less than high school education	Share of individuals under the age of 18 where neither the household head nor any resident parent has a high school diploma.	IPUMS USA, American Community Survey 5-year sample, 2020–2024.
Housing cost burden by household type	Children under age 18 who live in households where more than 30% of the monthly income was spent on rent, mortgage payments, taxes, insurance, and/or related expenses.	IPUMS USA, American Community Survey 5-year sample, 2020–2024.
Family moves	Share of individuals under the age of 18 who changed their physical home address over the past year.	US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Table B07001, 2020–2024.

School Performance

Formal schooling offers numerous opportunities to identify and address challenges to development. Yet most schools across the country lack enough school counselors, and the shortages disproportionately affect students who may require additional support.¹⁸ Ensuring that all schools have the resources to identify and address academic problems at key inflection points should be a statewide priority.

One of these key inflection points is English Language Arts (ELA) performance in the third grade, a year by which students should be strong readers. From fourth grade onward, students' reading proficiency is essential in all areas of school—to understand all other subjects, including math and science, to solve problems, to think critically, and to share what they have learned. Children who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to find themselves among the country's lowest-income earners as adults.¹⁹ Low literacy is also associated with additional behavioral and social problems in subsequent years.²⁰

Similarly, math performance in the eighth grade is a strong indicator of how students will fare in later parts of their academic careers. Passing algebra in the eighth grade is the gateway to advanced math in high school and is associated with higher rates of college enrollment.²¹ For this dashboard, we use an indicator of seventh-grade rather than eighth-grade math performance since upwards of 95 percent of New Jersey seventh graders take a single test, whereas a large share of eighth graders take different tests based on the type of math class they are in. The seventh-grade scores are a good gauge of which students will be able to both take and succeed in algebra as eighth graders.

Students set up to thrive in these areas will be more capable of graduating high school on time, a critical step for adolescent well-being and future educational and economic success. Research shows that young adults with a high school diploma are more likely to obtain advanced degrees, get a better job, and earn a higher income, setting the foundation for a life with greater choice and opportunity for themselves and their families.²²

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE		
Indicator	Definition	Source
ELA proficiency— 3rd grade	Percent of 3rd grade students (NJSLA-ELA) who met or exceeded standardized ELA test expectations.	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
ELA growth— grades 4–8	Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) districtwide for ELA—measures how much students grew on NJSLA-ELA relative to academic peers (same starting scores).	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
Math proficiency— 7th grade	Percent of 7th grade students (NJSLA-Math) who met or exceeded standardized math test expectations.	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
Math growth— grades 4–7	Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) districtwide for math—measures how much students grew on NJSLA-Math relative to academic peers (same starting scores).	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
On-time high school graduation	Percentage of students in the four-year adjusted cohort who graduated within four years, using the federal (ESSA) definition of the graduation rate.	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2024–2025.

Challenges to Development

Just as meeting key milestones like third-grade reading proficiency makes high school graduation and other positive outcomes more likely, certain problems flag difficulties to come. Chronic absenteeism, for instance, can have a major impact on whether students meet grade-level standards, graduate high school on time, and form connections with their peers and caring adults.²³ In addition to facing suspensions and other disciplinary action, these students are at higher risk of disengagement from school, repeating a grade, failing to graduate, and even engaging with the justice system.²⁴ This can have long-term effects: compared to their peers, students who drop out of high school are much more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, enter the criminal justice system, have health issues, and be single parents with children who also drop out.²⁵

During adolescence, a period of crucial development, involvement with violent incidents and the juvenile justice system can be traumatic and pose severe challenges to the physical and mental health of young adults and their families. Contact with the juvenile justice system can disrupt young people’s educational and professional trajectories and heighten their risk of being rearrested later

in life. Moreover, these adverse experiences significantly increase the risk that young people will develop harmful health conditions and risk behaviors such as depression, obesity, smoking, and heavy drinking.²⁶

CHALLENGES TO DEVELOPMENT		
Indicator	Definition	Source
Chronic absenteeism	Percent of students districtwide who were chronically absent (typically defined as missing 10%+ of enrolled school days).	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
Dropout rate	Percentage of students in grades 9–12 who left school during the year without transferring to another educational program; expressed as an annual (single-year) rate.	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
Suspensions rate	Percentage of students districtwide who were suspended from school (includes short- and long-term).	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
Offenses related to violence, weapons, substances, and harassment	Total unique incidents of violence, weapons, vandalism, substance offenses, and HIB (harassment/intimidation/bullying) – calculated per 100 students.	New Jersey School Performance Reports, 2023–2024.
Juvenile arrests	Total youth arrests for delinquency offenses, all charges, per Uniform Crime Report (UCR) figures cited in the New Jersey Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) report.	New Jersey Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) 2023 Annual Data Report, 2022–2023.

Youth Disconnection

Disconnected youth, also referred to as opportunity youth, are young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school. A community’s youth disconnection rate is a strong indicator of its resources and a telling gauge of its residents’ well-being and access to opportunity. Lacking strong connections to school or the workplace during this period takes a toll on a young person’s well-being and casts a long shadow into their future. The late teens and early twenties, a period known as emerging adulthood, is when young people develop many of the capabilities required

to live a flourishing life: knowledge and credentials, social skills and networks, a sense of mastery and agency, an understanding of their strengths and preferences, and the ability to handle stressful events and regulate their emotions, to name just a few. Measure of America determined that by the time young people reach their thirties, those who worked or were in school throughout their teens and early twenties earn \$41,200 more per year (in inflation-adjusted 2024 dollars) and are 45 percent more likely to own a home, 42 percent more likely to be employed, and 52 percent more likely to report excellent or good health than those who had been disconnected as young people.²⁷

YOUTH DISCONNECTION		
Indicator	Definition	Source
Youth disconnection	Percentage of teens and young adults ages 16 to 24 who are neither working nor in school.	US Census Bureau, American Community Survey Custom Tabulation, 2019–2023.

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MEASURE OF AMERICA

Measure of America is a project of the nonpartisan **Social Science Research Council**, a century-old independent nonprofit that mobilizes knowledge for the public good. Measure of America creates easy-to-use, methodologically sound tools for understanding well-being, inequality, and access to opportunity in America. We work with partners to breathe life into numbers, using data to identify areas of need, pinpoint levers for change, and track progress over time.

Since our founding in 2006, Measure of America has produced over 60 clear, accessible reports and interactive online mapping and data visualization tools based on our original research. Our work has touched every US state, county, city, and congressional district and guided hundreds of millions of dollars of federal, state, local, and philanthropic investments.

The root of this work is the human development and capabilities approach, the brainchild of Harvard professor and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen. Human development is about improving people's well-being and expanding their choices and opportunities to live freely chosen lives of value. Disconnection from school and work during young adulthood hampers human development, closing off some of life's most rewarding and joyful paths and leading to a future of limited horizons and unrealized potential.

For more information, visit:

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PARTNER

New Jersey Opportunity Youth Coalition

After decades of advocacy and providing services to opportunity youth, youth-serving community-based organizations throughout the state formalized their efforts by jointly founding the NJ OY Coalition. Newark Opportunity Youth Network (NOYN) now serves as the backbone of the Coalition and works to convene all member organizations and partners.

Since the time of the NJ OY Coalition's formal assembly, the Coalition has supported the passage and signing of both its targeted bills - the Disconnection Prevention Bill (S3080) and the NJ YouthBuild Act (S3781) - into law.

The Coalition remains committed not only to advocating in support of new legislation, but also to ensuring the Disconnection Prevention Bill and the NJ YouthBuild Act are implemented swiftly, and with fidelity.

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